

Exodus 2:23-25; 3:1-15; 4:10-17

We Welcome

October 3, 2021

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When I'm asked what I think the job of being a minister really is, I tell the asker that my job is to make God accessible to people. I say this, recognizing that many of us have a complicated relationship with God and, ironically, it is often the Church that makes our relationships with God so complicated. Today's text, that includes the familiar story of Moses and the burning bush, gives us a window into Moses's early relationship with God. And it encourages us to reflect on how open we are to the ways in which God is trying to get our attention and what it means to be loved by a God named "I am who I am."

Before we get to Moses, though, we need to get from last week's story of Jacob and his wild dream in Genesis 28 to Exodus 2. It is a wild ride, and I will abbreviate this synopsis for time's sake. Having schemed his way to his brother's birthright and his father's blessing, Jacob ran away and found himself employed by Laban, his mother's brother. There he met and married Leah and Rachel, Laban's daughters, as well as their maids Bilhah and Zilpah. With these four wives he had thirteen children. One of the sons was Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his older brothers. Enslaved in Egypt, Joseph rose to power through his gifts of dream interpretation and administration.

Joseph skillfully led Egypt through a famine. People came from abroad to buy food, including Joseph's brothers. The family was reunited and settled in Egypt. After many years, a new pharaoh arose over Egypt, and as is often the case during transitions of power, it was a dangerous time for the most vulnerable in Egypt. The new Pharaoh was afraid of the large number of Israelites living in his land. He ordered them enslaved and all the male babies thrown into the Nile. The Pharaoh's daughter found the infant Moses floating on the river in a basket and raised him as her own son. As an adult, Moses saw an Egyptian beating an Israelite and he killed the Egyptian and buried him. When he was found out, he ran away to Sinai to make a new life for himself. We pick up the story from there at the end of Exodus chapter 2:

²³ After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. ²⁴ God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ²⁵ God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

3 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³ Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴ When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵ Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷ Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸ and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹ The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰ So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." ¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" ¹² He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

¹³ But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" ¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I am who I am." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'" ¹⁵ God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

¹⁰ But Moses said to the Lord, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of

speech and slow of tongue.”¹¹ Then the Lord said to him, “Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?”¹² Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.”¹³ But he said, “O my Lord, please send someone else.”¹⁴ Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and he said, “What of your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad.”¹⁵ You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do.¹⁶ He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him.¹⁷ Take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs.”

There is a lot to think about in this story. I’ve heard preachers use this story of Moses as an example of what not to do when we are called by God to do something. We shouldn’t make excuses to God. We should just say yes! I’ve never been convinced that God wants a bunch of “yes” people around. I don’t think God minds a little spunk, some questions, and even a little disagreement from time to time. So, rather than criticize Moses for having questions, let’s talk about the interaction between God and Moses in terms of building their relationship and what their encounter might have to teach us about encountering God in our own lives.

In the story, Moses was looking after his father-in-law’s sheep when he noticed a bush that was on fire. He could have quickly led his flock away from the fire. He could have run away, leaving the flock to fend for themselves. He could have used the little bit of water he had with him to try to put out the fire. He didn’t do any of that, though. Instead, he responded with curiosity for he noticed the bush was on fire, but not being consumed. “I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up,” he said. He recognized that something was different about this bush and this fire, and he was open to exploring what that something different might be. So, he didn’t just walk by it, he stopped to really look at it.

Moses’s willingness to explore something new, to have this encounter, whatever this encounter was, demonstrates an important leadership quality: curiosity. Curiosity is simply asking questions, using intelligent, thoughtful, and targeted questions to help us understand a situation from more than a surface level

perspective. Moses begins this encounter with curiosity, “Why isn’t this bush burning up?” And it wasn’t until he demonstrated that he was curious that God called out to him from the bush.

“Moses, Moses!” And Moses responded, hineni, (he-neigh-knee). This is the same powerful Hebrew word Abraham used when God called out to him. It is translated, “Here I am!” But hineni (he-neigh-knee) is not an announcement of where a person is physically, like, “I’m over here,” it is more like, “Whatever you want, I am here for it!” The voice told Moses that where he was standing was holy and that the voice was the God of his father and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

God told Moses about the suffering the Israelites were experiencing in Egypt at the whim of Pharaoh. God had heard their miserable cries and had decided, maybe based on Moses’s curiosity and his reaction to the bush, that God would use Moses to liberate the Israelites.

But Moses was still curious. He had questions, reasonable questions. The first was about his own identity. Moses asked, “Who am I to go to Pharaoh and get him to free the Israelites?” Moses was nobody. He had no power. He wasn’t wealthy or influential. Pharaoh had no reason to listen to him, let alone do what he said. I mean wouldn’t it have been better for God to attract the attention of one of Pharaoh’s advisors and convince him to talk to Pharaoh? At least he would have some sway with the powerful leader. But God promised what God always promises, “I will be with you. No matter what. I will be there.”

Moses was still curious. And what I love is that God doesn’t shut him down and say, “Look, I’m God and I am the boss of you, and you will just do what I say.” Instead, Moses’s concerns and questions find an openness in God and end up leading Moses to a fuller understanding of God. Having asked about his own identity, Moses’s second question was about God’s identity. He asked, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name? What shall I say to them?’” So, not only was Moses concerned about his interaction with Pharaoh, but he was also concerned about his interaction with the Israelites. I have a hunch, though, that the question Moses was asking was less about the Israelites in Egypt and more about Moses. Moses wanted to know, “Who are you really, God?”

God responded, "I am who I am." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'" ¹⁵ God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you':

This is my name forever,
and this my title for all generations.

Not only does God share the divine name with Moses, God reinforces the nature of their relationship. By referencing Moses's ancestors, God makes it clear that God is a forever, no matter what, kind of God who is a promise keeper. So, what of this divine name, translated "I am who I am?" It is an early form of the Hebrew verb "to be," not a noun as we would expect. The divine name could be translated in any of these ways: I am who I am; I will be what I will be; I am what I am, I am becoming what I am becoming. As the name suggests, God will not be confined in the same ways human beings are confined by time and space. God is everything, everywhere, in all times and places. And in this story, we see Moses beginning his relationship with this great, big God. And it all began with curiosity and his questions, "Who am I and who are you, God?"

These questions are serious questions, questions we all ask throughout our lives. And I believe our own encounters with the Holy help us answer them for ourselves. I actually don't know a single person who has encountered God in a burning bush, through the message of a glittery angel with wings and halo, a voice from a cloud, or any grand show of divine power. The stories I have heard about the encounters others have had with God, and my own experiences as I've encountered God, have happened in pretty ordinary places, among pretty ordinary people.

What I have noticed, even before I returned to the church as an adult, is that tables are very often one of the places in which the Holy is encountered. When I was teenager, I spent a lot of time with my best friend, Melissa's family. I even called her parents mom and dad. I had the opportunity to see them last weekend when I officiated their grandson's wedding. The night before the wedding, we sat down all together, around a table at their house, and had supper. The memories of all the meals we had together forty years ago came flooding back. What I remembered most was her dad's questions. He was curious, not only about what we were up to (for obvious reasons), but about what we thought and how we

thought about things. He was genuinely interested in our opinions about everything: politics, religion, movies, even fashion. We were huge fans of Madonna, so you can understand why he would ask us about fashion. His questions and the way he listened to my answers taught me that what I think matters. I wouldn't have been able to articulate this then, but now I know that around that table, I was learning who I was and who I wanted to be. That was holy ground.

Later, when I was trying to figure out if I wanted to be a Christian or not, I remember a Disciples of Christ minister talking about communion like it was a family dinner. He talked about how very often in his house growing up, there would be extra people at their family table. He said there was always enough food for whoever happened to be at their house when dinner was ready. He remembered that it was not unusual to be in the middle of a meal and have friends come in and pull up a chair and grab a plate. He said that's what communion ought to be like. When he said that, I thought of my friend, Melissa's house. And I decided maybe there was something about this God that made sense in my life. The idea of being welcome, no matter what, appealed to me.

And that is one of the things I love about DCC. We welcome. This table is the "come on in, pull up a chair, grab a plate" kind of table. It is a table we imagine that God sets for all of God's people and wherever it is, whatever it looks like, whatever is on it, each person present has the opportunity to encounter God. We encounter God in the bread and juice that remind us of our dependence on the earth. We encounter God in the faces of the ones who are with us at the table. We encounter God as we remember that Jesus sat at all kinds of tables, with all kinds of people, and he loved all the people. And today, especially, we encounter God as we reflect on God's dream for the world, that one day all of creation will be made whole.

Here at DCC, we take God's dream of wholeness seriously. We know that we cannot whole if our neighbors are not. So, a lot of the work of our shared ministry has to do with welcoming people into safe community where love is shared freely and we are held together, not because we all believe exactly the same things, but because we believe in God's dream and we know it will only come to be if we work together. This church needs you. We come from many places to gather here,

for wide is God's welcome...and believe this, dear ones, you are welcome here.
You are loved...more than you know. Amen.